

Rebel with a Vision

Vjenceslav Richter

Retrospective

23.03.-02.09.2018

In cooperation with MSU / Museum of
Contemporary Art Zagreb

Neue Galerie Graz, Universalmuseum Joanneum

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This text is published on the occasion of the exhibition

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Curator

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Vjenceslav Richter (*1917 Omilje, +2002 Zagreb) was one of the most important architects, artists, designers and thinkers of the Croatian scene, which he helped shape mainly during the period of the former Yugoslavia. For the centenary of his birth, Vesna Meštrić from the MSU Zagreb has devised a comprehensive retrospective, offering for the first time an overview of his oeuvre. This exhibition is now presented at Neue Galerie Graz in an adapted way. Richter's works were frequently on show in Graz, as part of trigon 67, trigon 75, a solo show in 1972, and numerous collection exhibitions, in which his works from the Neue Galerie's collections were shown.

Richter was a 'rebel with a vision', who pursued a synthesis in many of his projects. Whenever Richter gave thought to architecture, it was always a consideration of the form that crossed the boundaries to a sculptural kind of creation. His work as an architect led to an involvement with the furnishings used inside, evolving to reflection upon whole forms of living whereby cities could be entirely re-organised. His thinking extended far into social and political domains and was closely related to the political situation in Yugoslavia—or was conceived from it.

Thus Richter also built an international career on national buildings: the Yugoslavian national pavilions at major international exhibitions and trade fairs such as those in Brussels, Turin or Milan, museum designs for Krapina, Belgrade or in Aleppo, Syria. Most well known in Croatia, however, are presumably his designs for the Villa Zagorje, Tito's former residence in Zagreb and the present official home of the Croatian president, along with the factory of the Croatian soap manufacturer Saponia in Osijek. His thoughts on 'Synthurbanism'

were important. He used this term to describe a combination of architecture, urbanism, and the visual arts, which then led to systemic painting, graphic arts or sculpture. Synthurbanism is Richter's particular version of the 'total work of art', in which each element was devised to flow into the other as if cast from a single mould, yet with enough free space retained to allow individuals as the central point of reference.

1 First steps towards synthesis

From 1950 to 1956 EXAT 51 was an experimental artists' group in Zagreb to which both architects and artists belonged. This group forced the pace of abstract art, helping modernism in Yugoslavia to become a universal language. The group penned a manifesto in 1951 in which they demanded equality between all forms of art, whether fine or applied. They spoke of 'visual communication' and of the necessity for ceaseless experimentation in the permeation of art into life, linked to a highly abstract language of form. At this time Richter was an impor-

tant member of this group, which created five exhibitions in Vienna, Stockholm, Hannover, Chicago and Paris from 1949 to 1950, with Richter responsible for the architectural designs.

First buildings

Besides the exhibition pavilions, some of which were only temporarily constructed, Richter also realised his first buildings in the 1950s, which he conceived jointly with his fellow-architects from the EXAT 51 group. The most famous example is the Archaeological Museum in Aleppo, which at the time became one of the most successful Yugoslavian architectural projects outside of the country. Its language of form was marked by a clarity of line and simplicity of volume. The interplay with geometrical forms recalls the Bauhaus in Germany, which as a school of art advocated the fusion of art and handcrafts. In this sense, as also in the clear, abstract language of form, the Bauhaus served as a model for EXAT 51.

2 Synthurbanism

Synthurbanism or synthetic urbanism describes a radical, unrealised project that Vjenceslav Richter developed from 1954 as a theory for a self-governing city. It was created in the Cold War period, during which Yugoslavia (from 1945) was under the rule of the communist People's Front led by Tito. As a neutral confederation of states, it achieved self-government, with which Yugoslavia as a decentralised economic and political model was positioned between a planned and free market economy. This special form of communism as found in Yugoslavian self-government in the period following World War Two is considered a historical project which, with its capitalist interrelations, promoted workers' autonomy. In his theory of Synthurbanism, Richter assigned humans central place as the fundamental unit. Similar to how Le Corbusier introduced the Modulor as the system of proportion in architecture from 1942, so Richter also foregrounded a system of architectural and urban development which developed a mathematical

order to the human unit. Time was a key factor in this. It mattered to Richter to minimise the journeys people made and so the time wasted, leading him to devise an idea of the city as subdivided into self-governing units with a Ziggurat-like arrangement; this optimised scheme was to include all areas of living such as accommodation, work and leisure, with the short distances involved minimising any potential time loss.

The concept of Synthurbanism, in which all areas of life are ideally linked to new units, also forms the core of his other ideas and research concerning architecture, painting, graphic arts and sculpture. In this regard, the sculptures he created around between 1964 and 1969 relating to a relief metre are impressive. For example, by using standardised ashlar made of aluminium, Richter developed a series of forms which can just as well be seen as architectural designs as they can function as independent sculpture.

3 Between theory and practise

Richter, together with his colleague Emil Weber, developed the Yugoslavian pavilion for the EXPO 58 in Brussels, which in terms of concept intended for a far greater scope than the commissioning party was then ready to risk in reality. The design, which signals the overcoming of gravity by having the whole building hang from an oversized mast, won the competition as it was seen as a symbol of the nation that provided the expertise to bring about complex structures, yet which permitted radical ideas, above all. Seeing themselves as progressive, they wanted to demonstrate this as a nation, too, through this pavilion.

In 1963, Richter created his first version of the 'Reliefmeter' an extendable and continuously alterable structure based on a standardised element. At the 13th Triennale in Milan, he picks up this principle and transfers it to the room. The visitors are invited to pass through the uniform, moving wooden slats, and thus become part of the artwork. In this approach that uses a sculpture-like setting, innovative for

the 1960s, the participatory aspect in the art of the time comes to the fore in Richter, too.

4 Exploring new areas

In the years around 1970, Richter was once again increasingly occupied with pictorial means, developing painterly, sculptural and architectural objects from technically exact graphic works. He wanted to overcome the right angle using systemic painting. He experimented in geometrical drawings with various possibilities, which he ultimately transferred to painting, too, in which he now only allowed lines which were angled at either 10 or 80 degrees.

For the Yugoslavian pavilion in Turin (1961), Richter once again worked with his former colleague from EXAT 51 on a synthetic structure which was conceived as blending the building with its interior life to create a unity. The furnishings and architectural form were extended by a widely praised ideational level: the workers' self-government found expression in the circular, wave-like roof construction.

From 1963 onwards Richter received together with Kazimir Ostrogović the commission for the Villa Zagorje, which was to become Tito's residence in Zagreb's exclusive Pantovčak district.

Richter and Ostrogović conceived of a modern, two-storey structure, which was to give none too grand an impression externally, yet which was still able to do justice to all the representative aspects demanded of it. Equally, it was meant to combine a modern view of architecture in a clear and lucid language of form with the conservative demands of the president. His design was massively reworked, however, so that little remained of Richter's original intentions.

trigon 75

In 1975, the Neue Galerie presented in the Künstlerhaus the three-country Biennale trigon 75: *identity - alternative identity - counter identity* as part of the steirischer herbst festival. Richter presented a broken-up cube that was conceived as a walk-in pavilion for outdoors. He called it *The*

Black Hole and filled the interior with his own pictures in a collage with those of his works. The synthesis was treated in this work as a question of identity and became a concentrate of architecture, sculpture, image and self-portrait—following Richter's 'synthetic' logic, the human point of reference in this work being the artist himself.

5 Nada

Originally, *Nada* rose a dizzying 35 metres into the air at the EXPO 58. Made of standardised steel elements, *Nada* was initially so constructed that the single parts were to keep statically in balance with one another by means of the load and pressure. The powerfully symbolic sculpture with its overcoming of gravity was to support the bold pavilion metaphorically. However, it took forty years for *Nada*—which means 'hope' in Croatian—to be actually built the way Richter had planned it at the outset.

6 Spatial Picture

To achieve abstract pictures in space is a goal that artists have pursued in the most varied ways since the avantgarde began in the 20th century. Richter links it with his concept of synthesis by transferring the two-dimensional line to a spatial body. The cube itself remains transparent as the image medium and is divided up with mathematic precision into surfaces so that a linear composition is formed, both geometrically and abstractly, into a line composition. This can now be viewed from several angles like a sculpture and yet does not lose the pictorial character of a graphic work.

1917

Born April 8 in Zagreb

1937–1949

Studies of Architecture in Zagreb

1941–1945

Actively involved in the anti-fascist resistance

1946

Member of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia

1947

Designed his first exhibition pavilion for the Trieste Fair

1950

Trip to Chicago

Marriage with actress Nada Kareš

From 1949–1950

Exhibition pavilions for international fairs in Vienna,

Stockholm, Hanover and Paris, with Picelj and Srnec

1951

Founding member of the artists' group EXAT 51 [Experimentalni Atelijer]

1951–1955

Head of the Architectural Design Department at the Academy for Applied Arts Zagreb

1953–1956

President of EXAT 51 up to its break-up in 1956

1955

Organised the 1st Triennale in Zagreb

1958

Jugoslavian Pavilion at the EXPO 58 in Brussels, with Emil Weber, first version of the sculpture *Nada* [Hope]

1961

Jugoslavian Pavilion at the Italia 61 in Turin without a single right angle

1963

Jugoslavian Pavilion at the 13th Triennale in Milan

Worked on the sculpture cycle

Centre; developed the first Relief-meter; concept of systemic plastics

Participated at *Nove tendencije 2*, Zagreb

1963–1976

Collaboration with Centar 51 architectural studio

1964

Publication of *Synthurbanism and Systemic plastics*

1965

Participated at *Nova tendencija 3*, Zagreb and Centre for Industrial Design, Zagreb

1967

Participated at trigon 67: *ambience*, Neue Galerie Graz

1968

Publication of *Heliopolis*

Participated at *Tendencije 4*, Zagreb

1970

Participated at the 35th Venice Biennale

1971

Jury member for trigon 71: *inter-media urbana*, Neue Galerie Graz

1972

trigon solo exhibition, Neue Galerie Graz, the first retrospective exhibition of his works
Participated at the 36th Venice Biennale

1973

Participated at *T-5: tendencije 5*, Zagreb

1974–1978

Developed special geometrical tools (triangles without right angles)

1975

Participated at trigon 75: *identity – alternative identity – counter identity*, Neue Galerie Graz

1976

Systemic Graphics und Spontaneous Graphics were shown in Tokyo, Venice, Ljubljana, Belfast and Washington.

1980

Donated together with Nada Kareš Richter their residence and their art collection to the City of Zagreb

1981

Johann Gottfried von Herder Award, Vienna/Hamburg

1986

Viktor Kovacic Award for Life Achievement

1992

Republic of Croatia Vladimir Nazor Award for Life Achievement

1997

Series of Spatial Pictures

The Vjenceslav Richter and Nada Kareš Richter Collection is entrusted to the MSU / Museum for Contemporary Art in Zagreb.

1998

Publication of *My Thought Space*, in which he traced the key fields of his work.

1999

Series of Gravitational Drawings

2000

Participated at the 47th Venice Biennale

The Vjenceslav Richter and Nada Kareš Richter collection in Zagreb opened to the public.

2002

Died on December 2 in Zagreb

Accompanying programme

Guided tours in German language
with Christof Elpons:

Sunday, 06.05.2018

Friday, 01.06.2018

Friday, 08.06.2018

Friday, 20.07.2018

Sunday, 22.07.2018

Thursday, 26.08.2018

always at 3.30 pm

For further information please
visit our website

www.neuegaleriegraz.at

An extensive Vjenceslav-Richter-
catalogue in English and Croatian
language as well as an exhibition
publication in German are
available at the bookshop.

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